

CHANGING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING STANDARDS AS A CONDITION FOR UNIVERSITY GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract. *The main aim of the study is to substantiate a new foreign language teaching standard in the universities of Russia closing the gap between the standards and the modern job market demands. In order to achieve this aim it is necessary to define the vector of the changes and correlate them with the bachelor and master students' requirements. The main changes which the modern labor market is undergoing are the emergence of new related professions, blurring borders between professions, difficulties defining narrow vocational standards. The study hypothesizes that foreign language teaching standards should be transformed towards greater interdisciplinarity and development of soft skills rather than a merely linguistic component in the course. The main methods of research, namely analyzing literature on the soft skills in demand with employers, polls of bachelors and masters on the need and possibility to develop soft skills in the ELT classroom, allowed identifying the soft skills which are in greater demand in terms of employability in the modern job market and received a positive feedback from the respondents – communicative competence, learnability, critical and creative thinking, collaboration skills. A similar poll was conducted among the graduates of the CAAS MSU working in various spheres. The study resulted in developing the new foreign language teaching standard which encompasses teaching two European languages, instructing with the help of interdisciplinary materials and forming soft skills on all the stages of foreign language acquisition.*

Keywords: *communicative competency, foreign language curriculum, interdisciplinary approach, labor market, learning to learn, soft skills.*

Introduction

The topicality of the study is determined by the necessity to develop a new standard of foreign language teaching in Russian universities taking into consideration significant changes occurring in the employment market. These changes are connected with globalization which has led to an increasing role of multinational corporations whose employees can be transferred between different spheres or even between different countries. Over the past 20 years Russia has

seen the growth in the number of small- and medium-size businesses which often work beyond Russia or have overseas partners. A manager must be able to independently conduct negotiations, maintain business correspondence, and check documents in a foreign language. Another feature of the modern job market is blurring vocational borders. The polls among the graduates demonstrate that they have to work in various fields – international organizations, diplomatic representative offices, trade missions, banks, business or scientific institutions. It means it is quite difficult to assume in which area a graduate of university humanitarian faculties will work upon graduation or whether they will be employed there for the rest of their working life. Thus, it seems obvious that soft skills should become an integral part of education in general and foreign language instruction in particular. The study aimed to discover via students' questionnaires whether the students at various stages of their education are aware of soft skills and their importance and how the most important soft skills can be formed and/or developed in a foreign language classroom apart from tasks and activities offered by course books. The authors' hypothesis is that it can be achieved through an interdisciplinary approach and multilingualism, i.e. teaching two European languages.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of skills which can help people succeed in life and profession followed the idea of life-long learning. There are abundant definitions of soft skills – 21st century skills, transferable skills, life skills, key competences being just a few. Very generally life skills have been defined as "...skills or abilities individuals need in order to achieve success in life, within the context of their socio-cultural milieu, through adaptation to, shaping of, and selection of environments" (Binkley, Erstad, Herman, Raizen, Ripley, & Rumble, 2010, p. 51).

This study analyzed the materials of the World Economic Forum in order to single out the vital soft skills which are predicted to be in demand with employers in many, if not all, spheres of work.

The event of the World Economic Forum in Dubai, March 2015, focused on education and identified 16 key skills for the 21st century placed into three categories – basic literacy, competencies and personal characteristics (World Economic Forum, 2015).

Most research works on soft skills agree that all skills can be learned and developed (Kechagias, 2011). Thus, in the context of foreign language teaching, it is the competencies in the scheme of the 21st century skills that are of a particular interest, i.e., critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, though some personality traits such as inquisitiveness,

determination, ability to adapt, social and cultural awareness, can also be developed through opting for certain approaches, curricula and methods of instruction.

According to the report by the World Economic Forum “The Future of Jobs 2020” (World Economic Forum, 2020), critical and creative thinking are gaining an increasing importance for the early 2020-es, followed by a greater demand for emotional intellect. Towards 2022 such skills as memory and verbal abilities (including active reading and listening, writing and speaking) will be playing an ever growing role. No doubt this is where foreign language instruction can actively come into play.

Another important source on soft skills is The Cambridge Framework of Life Competencies (CFLC) which concerns human functioning in various spheres of life and is not directly related to specific content areas in which people learning or using an L2 or L3 specialize (Cambridge Framework of Life Competencies (CFLC), 2018). “Competency” is defined by the Council of Europe as a mix of knowledge, skills and attitudes where:

knowledge – facts and figures, concepts, ideas and theories which are already established and support the understanding of a certain area or subject;

skills – ability and capacity to carry out processes and use the existing knowledge to achieve results;

attitudes – disposition and mind-sets to act/ react to ideas, persons or situations (Council Recommendations..., 2018).

The CFLC includes the following competencies: creative thinking, critical thinking, learning to learn, communication, emotional development, collaboration and social development. Each competency is further subdivided into component competencies. The first five competencies are of utmost relevance for this study.

Creative thinking is a complex concept which is characterized by divergent thinking, imagination, cognitive flexibility, intrinsic motivation and joy from dealing with things previously unfamiliar. Three components of creative thinking are: participating in creative activities; creating new content from own ideas or other resources; using newly created content to solve problems (CFLC, 2018).

Critical thinking refers to higher levels of thinking and consists of identifying links between ideas, analysing points of view and evaluating arguments, supporting evidence, synthesizing ideas and information, reasoning and conclusions (CFLC, 2018).

Learning to learn also comprises three components: practical skills for participating in learning, the so-called learning technologies; taking control and managing your own learning; self-reflection and self-assessment (CFLC, 2018).

Communication, or communication competency, is regarded as an essential skill for business professionals (Cenere, Gill, Lawson, & Lewis, 2015, p. xiii) undoubtedly extending far beyond reading and writing. “Good communication

skills make us employable, regardless of the specialization we are choosing within the business world” (Cenere et al, 2015, p. xiii). Communication is affected by complex human behavior, both verbal and non-verbal, when an individual demonstrates his or her own way of comprehending and interpreting meaning. “Mastering effective communication is a skill which can be developed and honed and is distinct from mastering the core linguistic features of a language” (CFLC, 2018, p. 5). Within the CFLC, communication comprises the following competencies: using appropriate language/register for context; managing conversations; participating with appropriate confidence and clarity (CFLC, 2018).

Collaboration involves the ability to work in a team towards a common goal, distribution of tasks and conflict management.

The concept of emotional intelligence dates back to 1990, when it was defined as “a set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one's life” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 185). Numerous research works have shown that emotional intelligence can account for academic and social achievements as well as the worker's success in the job market to a greater extent than cognitive abilities (Pope, Roper, & Qualter, 2011). Being able to result in productive relationships at a workplace, stronger collaboration and teaming, interpersonal skills can determine companies' success as well (Goleman, 1998; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruzo, 2008). The three main components of emotional development are: defining and comprehending emotions; managing one's emotions, empathy and relationship building skills (CFLC, 2018).

Emotional development can definitely become one of the targets of foreign language instruction, as it cannot be denied that studying languages and various cultures helps develop empathy and tolerance towards other people's sentiments.

One of the obvious ways to integrate soft skills into foreign language courses is to include tasks and activities aimed at problem-solving, pair and group work, debates, presentations, role play and others (Tevdovska, 2015). The authors' hypothesis is that it can be done through teaching university students two European languages and adopting an interdisciplinary approach.

Multilingualism has been shown to develop such vital skills as learnability (Marian & Shook, 2012); creativity (Furlong, 2009; Maley & Peachey, 2010); emotional intellect, competencies and foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014), critical thinking and other cognitive abilities (Keysar, Hayakawa & An, 2012; Bartolotti & Marian, 2012; Wallin, 2019) and, obviously, communicative competency.

As for the interdisciplinary approach to teaching is has been shown to develop critical thinking (establishing ties, analyzing and synthesizing ideas),

creative thinking (divergent thinking, complex approach to problem-solving, imagination), self-awareness and confidence.

Methodological Framework

In accordance with the aim of the study the following objectives were set:

- to explore the opinions of the 3^d- and 4th-year undergraduates on the prospect of studying a second European language from scratch after completing a 5-term English language course;
- to find out whether the 4th-year undergraduates and master students realize the importance of soft skills and which ones they regards as the most important;
- to query the graduates who are either working full time or combining work and post-graduate study about the soft skills and compare their responses with the above mentioned groups of students;
- to study whether all groups of the respondents consider the foreign language classroom a conducive environment for honing their soft skills;
- to explore how the students feel about interdisciplinary materials, which difficulties and challenges they might face.

Several polls were conducted over 2 years in order to verify whether the bachelor and master students might be interested in having a new standard developed, which would be aimed at acquiring two European languages, forming vital soft skills and studying interdisciplinary English course books.

All the questionnaires were designed by the authors in Russian, the mother tongue of the respondents, and consisted of questions of a close-ended, multi-choice type. The participants were asked to select up to 3 options out of several. There were 6 questions in the poll concerning the attitudes to a prospect of studying a second European language as part of the curriculum. The poll was conducted in autumn 2019 and was answered by 91 respondents. The questionnaire dealing with the students' opinions on the importance of soft skills and their development at foreign language lessons was carried out in autumn 2020 and produced 45 responses. Another poll concerned the students' attitudes towards interdisciplinary course books and materials and comprised 7 questions. The poll was conducted in April 2019 and brought 50 responses. These three questionnaires were typed out and distributed in class among the potential respondents who completed the questionnaires at leisure and submitted them in the teachers' absence. The poll targeting the graduates was compiled in *Google Forms* in January 2021 and sent out to them via a link, because these respondents could not be reached on the premises of the college. Their responses (23) were also anonymous. All the answers were subsequently compared and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

The aim of the first survey was to reveal whether the future specialists in Oriental and African Studies were willing to take up two European languages as part of the curriculum alongside their oriental/African one. Studying these languages often requires substantial input of time and effort but might not be in immediate demand in the labour market. Most college students learned English at school, quite often up to C1 or even C2 level by the time they apply to university. The respondents in the survey were 91 undergraduate students in the 5th or 7th semester. One hundred percent expressed the opinion that the knowledge of two European languages was necessary or very desirable. Sixty one percent consider that English alone is not sufficient for communicating in all possible professional and non-professional domains, while the majority realizes that command of two European languages may enhance their academic prospects (69.2 %) and career prospects (72.5 %).

The target group of the second survey (September 2020) consisted of bachelor students in their final year (4th year) and master students, i.e. those who are likely to be aware of the practical value of their education and to closely think about their future careers. The poll revealed that the majority of participants (91 %) acknowledge that theoretical knowledge given during the course of study should be combined with developing soft-skills. Only 1 person emphasized that core theoretical knowledge is sufficient, and two more respondents pointed out the utmost significance of soft skills alone. When asked to select the most important soft skills (out of critical and creative thinking, emotional development, learning to learn, collaboration), critical thinking was ranked top (68.8 %) followed by learnability (60) and collaboration (57.7 %). Creative thinking and emotional intellect had practically the same number of votes (46.6 % and 37 % respectively).

Another finding was that the overwhelming majority of the participants (97.7 %) responded that soft skills can and must be formed and honed in a foreign language classroom, while less than a half found it desirable. Finally, when asked to grade aspects for assessment (concrete material of the term, acquired competencies or soft skills), the majority (55.5 %) consider that competencies directly affecting the mastery of a foreign language should be assessed during formative and summative assessments, only 3 (6 %) respondents find it possible to assess soft skills. Possibly, the students feel somewhat fearful of their soft skills being assessed as there are no stringent criteria of assessing such qualities as creativity or teamwork. It is rather a psychological personality assessment where objective judgments are not possible.

A separate poll with the identical questions was conducted among the graduates of the College of Asian and African Studies and produced 27 responses.

The majority of participants either work full time (7) or combine work with post-graduate studies (14 persons).

Most respondents (92.6 %) agree that both core theoretical knowledge and soft skills are important for their career. Two respondents think the same about soft skills alone, none consider theoretical knowledge sufficient.

The overwhelming majority named learning to learn the most important skill (92%), followed by critical thinking (78.3 %), while collaboration and emotional intellect scored the same (43.5 %) following creative thinking (52.2 %). The respondents could also identify the qualities they themselves find important in an open-ended question. The traits they mentioned were public speaking skills and communicability, i.e. aspects of the communication competence.

Most respondents (78.3 %) stated that soft skills can and must be developed in a foreign language course, about a quarter (27.1 %) consider it possible. Almost a half (48.1 %) agreed that activities they did at their European language lessons contributed to the development of their soft skills, another 37 % found it possible. Nevertheless, three participants answered negatively.

Only 3 respondents share an opinion that it is most appropriate to assess the material studied during the term, 8 respondents think that it should be competencies, while another 5 consider that it is most acceptable to assess soft skills. On the whole, most participants point out that assessment should take into account all the three components – the material, the communication competencies and the soft skills.

The comparison of the results of the polls among bachelors/masters and graduates/post-graduates reveals shared opinions. Thus, most respondents from all the age groups find it necessary to combine core discipline knowledge with soft skills. As far as the most important skill was concerned, those graduates who are already in employment named learning to learn the first, putting critical thinking second. Bachelor and master students did the reverse.

As for the assessment, both formative and summative, more adult respondents were less apprehensive about their soft skills being assessed (18 % support the idea vs 6 %).

One more poll was conducted among the junior and senior students in order to reveal their attitudes to interdisciplinary materials and course books (Klyukina, Ziza, 2019).

As it can be expected, the students face some challenges of interdisciplinary approach, e.g., most respondents find the material connected with physics and chemistry to be the most difficult, while economics seems to be the hardest for future historians and philologists.

Nevertheless, the results seem to prove that the students feel positive about such an experience for various reasons – 66 % agree that studying material from various disciplines broadens their horizons, 50 % are of the opinion that it is

necessary to be capable of understanding the content coming from different fields of knowledge, while 27 % pragmatically remark that one never knows which knowledge and lexis can come in handy in the future.

The results of all the polls can be summed up as follows (not in the chronological order):

- the respondents realize the importance of soft skills, particularly critical thinking and learnability;
- the respondents find it possible and necessary to form and hone soft skills at a foreign language lesson;
- most respondents are willing to take up a second European language;
- most respondents support the interdisciplinary approach to foreign language studies.

The following tasks were solved as a result of the study:

- a foundation for a foreign language course orientated towards its practical usage in various spheres was identified – namely, forming and developing vital soft skills;
- the polls of the students demonstrated their willingness to study two European languages, provided their mastery of English is sufficient, which will not only expand the geography for the graduates' employability, but also foster vital soft skills such as learning to learn (developing memory and attention), critical thinking (through comparing L2 and L3) and communication competence, which involves not only mastering the language of an interlocutor, but also the elements of culture and ways of thinking;
- the polls showed some advantages of interdisciplinary course books, which offer a wide range of vocabulary from various content areas, practice common grammatical structures coupled with stylistic peculiarities of different professional registers of speech;
- the polls verify that the university students are interested in having their foreign language teaching standard modified.

Conclusion

The study had its practical result in a new foreign language instruction standard being developed for the College of Asian and African Studies of Lomonosov Moscow State University, which includes:

- teaching two European languages – English up to B2-C1 level and a second European language at the students' choice;
- using interdisciplinary course books and materials to teach English;
- forming and developing soft skills during foreign language classes alongside the linguistic component of the course.

Further research should be aimed at substantiating a new format of assessing the learning outcomes of the course and at defining priorities.

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